

Humanistic Buddhism in Singapore



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The term “Humanistic Buddhism” (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教) brings to mind the this-worldly Buddhist teachings of Master Taixu (太虛, 1890-1947), Master Yinshun (印順, 1906-2005), and Venerable Master Hsing Yun (星雲, 1927-). Needless to say, transnational Taiwanese “mega-temples” such as Fo Guang Shan Monastery (佛光山) and Tzu Chi Foundation (*Ciji gongde hui* 慈濟功德會) have played a significant role in the propagation of Buddhism and promotion of cultural and philanthropic activities in global-city Singapore and around the world. Yet, unknown to many scholars (and Buddhists) perhaps, the early ideas of Humanistic Buddhism have arrived in Singapore even before these well-known global Taiwanese Buddhist organizations. In my talk, I will discuss the history of Singapore’s Humanistic Buddhism from the early twentieth century to the present. I will present the development of Humanistic Buddhism in Singapore into three phases: 1) Taixu’s Human Life Buddhism (*rensheng fojiao* 人生佛教); 2) Yen Pei’s (演培, 1917-1996) Humanistic Buddhism; and 3) development of Taiwanese Humanistic Buddhist organizations in contemporary Singapore.

Traversing the South China Sea: Taixu and the Chinese Buddhist Association¹

Master Taixu was one of the most prominent figures among the Chinese Buddhist modernists during the Republican period. Born in 1890 in the Chongde County of Zhejiang province, he became a novice in Jiangsu, and received his higher ordination at the Tiantong Monastery in Ningpo. After his higher ordination, Taixu along with his classmates Huiquan (會泉, 1874-1942) and Yuanying (圓瑛, 1878-1953) received their monastic training at Tiantong Monastery (*Tiantong si* 天童寺) under the tutelage of Jichan (寄禪, 1852-1912). Later, he studied the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*

¹ This section is adapted substantially from my book manuscript in progress, *Monks in Motion: Buddhism and Modernity across the South China Sea*.

with lay Buddhist scholar Yang Wenhui (楊文會, 1837-1911), and English with translator Su Manshu (蘇曼殊, 1884-1918), at the Jetavana Hermitage (*Zhihuan jingshe* 祇洹精舍) in Nanjing.²

After the founding of the Republic of China in 1912, Taixu spearheaded the “Buddhist revival movement” (*fojiao fuxing yundong* 佛教復興運動) and advocated for the need to reform the monastic system and promote education. In 1922, Taixu founded the Wuchang Buddhist Institute (*Wuchang foxue yuan* 武昌佛學院), where he taught a new generation of young monks in China.³ A year later, he became the inaugural president of the World Buddhist Fellowship (*Fojiao shilian hui* 佛教世聯會). With a growing reputation among like-minded Buddhist modernists, Taixu was elected to succeed Huiquan as the abbot of Nanputuo Monastery (*Nanputuo si* 南普陀寺) and rector of the Minnan Buddhist Institute (*Minnan foxue yuan* 閩南佛學院) in 1927.⁴

An energetic and controversial monk of his time, Taixu called for a revitalization of Chinese Buddhism through “institutional reorganization, modern education, compassionate social action, and ecumenical cooperation in global mission.”⁵ He advocated

2 Yang Wenhui is often known as the “father of the revival of modern Chinese Buddhism” (*jindai zhongguo fojiao fuxing zhi fu* 近代中國佛教復興之父). In 1908, he established the Jetavana Hermitage as a seminary for monastic and laity in Nanjing. Yang Wenhui also setup the Jingling Scriptural Press to print and distribute Buddhist texts. For a biography of Yang, see Gabriele Goldfuss, *Vers un Bouddhisme du XXe Siecle: Yang Wenhui (1837-1911), Réformateur Laïque et Imprimeur* [Towards a 20th Century Buddhism: Yang Wenhui (1837-1911), Lay Reformer and Publisher], Paris: Collège de France, Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 2001.

3 On Wuchang Buddhist Institute, see Rongdao Lai, “The Wuchang Ideal: Buddhist Education and Identity Production in Republican China,” *Studies in Chinese Religions* 3, 1 (2017): 55-70.

4 *Xiamen fojiao zhi*, 278-280.

5 Don A. Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 2.

“Human Life Buddhism” as a remedy for Chinese Buddhism, which had been giving much emphasis on death, funerary rites, and otherworldly salvation. His ideas of Human Life Buddhism were aimed at addressing the social and spiritual problems of twentieth century China. Taixu attempted to change the image and understanding of Buddhism as a religion for the dead to emphasize on the practice of Buddhism for this-worldly life. Therefore, he promoted an utopian ideal of establishing a pure land on earth (*renjian jingtu* 人間淨土) than in attaining rebirth in the transcendental pure land.⁶ In his study of Taixu, Don Pittman suggests that first, Taixu was an “ethical pietist,” who encouraged individual piety and living a vigorous Buddhist life by drawing on the philosophy of the Consciousness-Only (*weishi* 唯識) school. The monk believed that religious actions were at the core of the spiritual practice and a bodhisattva’s process of spiritual transformation. Second, Taixu taught that Buddhists should strive to be socially responsible, and promoted a soteriology that emphasized action as fundamentally interconnected to the transformation of the social order.⁷

When Taixu became the abbot of the Nanputuo Monastery, he relied on the South China Sea networks to propagate his ideas of Human Life Buddhism and to seek donations from the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. Taixu made three visits to Singapore, in 1926, 1928, and 1940. In September 1926, Taixu came to Singapore and gave a series of talks at the Victoria Memorial Hall, which attracted a large crowd of overseas Chinese.⁸ As most of the Buddhist monasteries in Singapore during the early twentieth

6 On Taixu’s interpretation of the cult of Maitreya, see Justin R. Ritzinger, *Anarchy in the Pure Land: Reinventing the Cult of Maitreya in Modern Chinese Buddhism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

7 Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism*, 3-8.

8 Taixu, *Taixu zizhuan*, 136-137.

century were disconnected from the laity, Taixu suggested that the establishment of a lay Buddhist association would be beneficial in propagating the Dharma to the overseas Chinese community. Therefore, in one of his lectures, Taixu proposed the establishment of a lay Buddhist association in Singapore. Taixu's suggestion inspired Ning Dayun 寧達蘊, a prominent Buddhist householder, to establish a lay Buddhist organization in Singapore.⁹

A year later in 1927, Ning Dayun founded the Chinese Buddhist Association (*Zhonghua fojiao hui* 中華佛教會) with assistance from Zhuandao (轉道, 1872-1943) and financial support from the local business community.¹⁰ The Chinese Buddhist Association, situated in Singapore's Chinatown was the first lay Buddhist organization in the British colonial port city. It became an important institution for the promotion of Buddhist modernist movement in Singapore, providing education and welfare services for the overseas Chinese communities. The lay organization, strategically located in Kreta Ayer where most of the Chinese migrants lived, played a role in propagating Buddhist teachings and offering welfare services to overseas Chinese in Singapore.¹¹ The establishment of Chinese Buddhist Association is an example that demonstrates how the South China Sea networks facilitated the spread of Taixu's ideas of Human Life Buddhism from Xiamen to maritime Southeast Asia, which led to the establishment of new forms of Buddhist institutions in the Chinese diaspora.

In addition, Taixu was making plans to establish a World Buddhist Federation (*Shijie fojiao lianhe hui* 世界佛教聯合會) to

9 Shi, *Xinjiapo fojiao fazhan shi*, 96; Shi Nengdu 釋能度, Shi Xiantong 釋賢通, He Xiujuan 何秀娟, and Xu Yuantai 許源泰, eds., *Xinjiapo hanchuan fojiao fazhan gaishu* 新加坡漢傳佛教發展概述 [General History of the Development of Chinese Buddhism in Singapore], (Singapore: Buddha of Medicine Welfare Society, 2010), 315-317.

10 Shi, *Xinjiapo fojiao fazhan shi*, 96-97.

11 Shi, Shi, He, and Xu, *Xinjiapo hanchuan fojiao fazhan gaishu*, 41.

achieve his ecumenical vision, and further expand the South China Sea Buddhist networks into a global network for the propagation of Human Life Buddhism. He suggested the establishment of a Nanyang Buddhist Association (*Nanyang fojiao hui* 南洋佛教會), a regional Buddhist organization to connect three Southeast Asian countries—Dutch East Indies, Malaya and Singapore—with its headquarter to be based in Singapore. Taixu wanted Singapore to serve as a regional hub for Buddhist missionary activities and hoped that the Nanyang Buddhist Association could link the three maritime Southeast Asian states to international Buddhist networks.¹² He saw potential in the development of Buddhism in maritime Southeast Asia and believed that a regional Buddhist hub could contribute to the advancement of Buddhist education, provision of welfare services, and Buddhist Studies research in the Chinese diaspora.¹³ Although Taixu's vision for a Nanyang Buddhist Association never materialized, it reveals his ecumenical ambition to expand the South China Sea networks.

From Scholar-Monk to Social Activist: Yen Pei and the Singapore Buddhist Welfare Services¹⁴

Venerable Yen Pei was one of the prominent socially engaged Buddhist monks involved in progressive Buddhist ideas and welfare works in Singapore. His life and work highlight the international and

12 Taixu 太虛, “*Quan Nanyang fojiao zuzhi zhi xiwang* 全南洋佛教組織之希望” [The Hope for a Pan-Nanyang Buddhist Organization], in *Taixu dashi quanshu*, volume 28, 234.

13 Taixu 太虛, “*Nanyang fojiao hui zhi zhanwang* 南洋佛教會之展望” [The Prospect of a Nanyang Buddhist Association], in *Taixu dashi quanshu*, volume 28, 618-619.

14 This section is based on my book chapter “Toward a History of Engaged Buddhism in Singapore,” in *Living with Myths in Singapore*, eds. Loh Kah Seng, Thum Ping Tjin, and Jack Meng-Tat Chia, (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2017), 229-238.

national forces that shaped Buddhist social activism. Born in 1917 in Jiangsu province in China, Yen Pei became a monk at a young age. After receiving his higher ordination, Yen Pei's master recognised his potential and wanted him to succeed as abbot of the temple. But Yen Pei did not like the idea of becoming a temple administrator and wished to further his studies to become a Buddhist Studies scholar. Therefore, the young monk left the temple and travelled south to Xiamen in Fujian province to be enrolled in the Minnan Buddhist Institute, one of the most progressive Buddhist seminaries during the Republican period (1912-1949). He became a student of the renowned Buddhist reformer Taixu, who was actively promoting the concept of Human Life Buddhism.¹⁵

Later, Yen Pei became a student of renowned Buddhist thinker Yinshun (印順, 1906-2005), best known for his works on Humanistic Buddhism, which had a decisive influence on a future generation of Chinese Buddhist monastics.¹⁶ He was inspired by Yinshun's ideas of Humanistic Buddhism, which integrates Buddhist doctrines into everyday life and shifts the focus of Buddhist practices from other-worldly salvation to this-worldly spiritual pursuits. When the Chinese Civil War broke out, Yen Pei and Yinshun left mainland China for Hong Kong, before going to Taiwan in the early 1950s. Yen Pei later became the abbot of Shandao Monastery (*Shandao si* 善導寺) in Taipei from 1957 to 1960.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Yen Pei was invited to give several Dharma talks in Southeast Asia.¹⁷ During his trips, he was

15 For study of Taixu's reforms, see Don A. Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001.

16 Charles Brewer Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan: Religion and the State, 1660-1990* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), chapter 4; Pittman, *Modern Chinese Buddhism*, 263-270.

17 Yen Pei's travel accounts were later published in Yen Pei 演培, *Nantian youhua* 南天遊化 [Teaching in the South], Taipei: Tianhua, 1990.

warmly received and invited to reside and teach in Malaya and Singapore. In 1963, Yen Pei decided to settle in Singapore and became the abbot of Leng Foong Prajna Auditorium (*Lingfeng bore jiangtang* 靈峰般若講堂). During his tenure as abbot, Yen Pei was an active Dharma teacher and promoter of Humanistic Buddhism. He was a prolific scholar who produced a 34-volume collection of essays under the title *Collected Works of Mindful Observation* (*Diguan quanji* 諦觀全集).¹⁸ He also renovated and expanded the Leng Foong Prajna Auditorium into a center for Buddhist Studies in Singapore.¹⁹

Yen Pei's social activism is better understood against the wider context of Singapore society at the time. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the People's Action Party government played a dominant role in transforming the physical, economic, and social landscape of Singapore. The developmental state introduced its modernization program, including industrialization, infrastructural growth, public housing, education and industrial training, and population control, which had an immense impact on the population.²⁰ Between 1965 and 1985, Singapore experienced rapid economic growth and was transformed from a trading port to a major manufacturing hub in the region.²¹ The rapid economic development precipitated a rise in the cost of living and the stratification of Singapore society. With rising costs of living in the 1980s, the lower-income group

18 A 12-volume sequel was subsequently published as *A Sequel to the [Collected Works of] Mindful Observation* (*Diguan xuji* 諦觀續集).

19 Yen Pei 演培, *Yige fanyu seng de zibai* 一個凡愚僧的自白 [Confessions of an ordinary and foolish monk], Zhengwen chubanshe, Taipei, 1989, 493-507.

20 Shirley M.S. Yee and Chua Beng Huat, "Sociological Research: Following the Contours of Social Issues," in *Singapore Studies II: Critical Surveys of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. Chua Beng Huat, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1999), 230.

21 Carl A. Trocki, *Singapore: Wealth, Power and the Culture of Control* (London: Routledge, 2006) 107.

experienced much economic deterioration.²²

As a firm believer in Humanistic Buddhism, Yen Pei saw the need for Buddhists to be socially engaged, particularly to address the economic deterioration of the lower income group in Singapore society. In 1980, he decided to establish the Singapore Buddhist Welfare Services (*Xinjiapo fojiao fuli xiehui* 新加坡佛教福利協會, hereafter SBWS). With the help of his disciple Venerable Kuan Yan (寬嚴), Yen Pei gave a Dharma talk to raise funds for the organization. The SBWS was officially registered as a charitable religious organization with the Registry of Societies on 27 May 1981.²³

The work of the SBWS falls into three major areas: elder care and filial responsibility; organ donation and kidney dialysis; and drug prevention and rehabilitation. During the late 1970s and 1980s, in response to the perceived “crisis of the welfare state,” the PAP government decided to scale back state subsidies and redistribution programs, following similar trends in Britain, western Europe and the United States. Instead, the government emphasised individual and family self-reliance to attain their own economic and social well-being.²⁴ Consequently, the government provided social assistance on a selective, rather than entitlement, basis. Later, it promoted the “many helping hands” policy in the early 1990s whereby welfare provision was defined as the joint responsibility of the family, community, non-government groups, and the state.²⁵ The government offered limited support to the

22 Yee and Chua, “Sociological Research,” 239.

23 Yen Pei, *Yige fanyu seng de zibai*, 508-512.

24 Chua Beng Huat, “Singapore: Growing Wealth, Poverty Avoidance and Management,” in *Developmental Pathways to Poverty Reduction*, ed. Yusuf Bangura, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 205-206.

25 Ang Bee Lian, “The Soul of Nation Building in Singapore: Contributions from Social Work,” in *50 Years of Social Issues in Singapore*, ed. David Chan, (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2015), 142.

unemployed, the poor aged, the ill, and the disabled, while it would not seek to redistribute income from the affluent to the poor. The government thus viewed poverty as a short-term problem which had individual, rather than structural, causes.²⁶

Concomitantly from 1975, there was a decline in the fertility rate and rise in the proportion of the aged in Singapore. The number of the school-going population declined from a peak of 569,400 in 1970 to 418,800 in 1990 as the birth rate declined over the two decades.²⁷ At the same time, the “old dependency burden,” defined as the proportion of those aged 60 and over, increased twofold from 3.8 per cent in 1957 to 7.2 per cent in 1980 and 8.4 per cent in 1990.²⁸ In 1982, the government formed the Committee on the Problems of the Aged to study the impact of the greying population.²⁹ In line with the government’s approach to social welfare, the Committee’s report placed the onus of the issue on the family, community and society. It emphasised the pivotal role of the family in providing care for elderly, and the need to promote filial piety among young Singaporeans.³⁰

In this context, Yen Pei was concerned with the welfare of poor and elderly Singaporeans and to address a need that the government did not provide for. He gave a series of sermons on the Buddhist perspective of elder care and filial responsibility that

26 Philip Mendes, “An Australian Perspective on Singaporean Welfare Policy,” *Social Work and Society* 5, 1 (2007): 35.

27 Saw Swee-Hock, *The Population of Singapore (Third Edition)*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012), 36.

28 Ibid., 37-38. For distribution of Singapore’s population by age group from 1901 to 2010, see Saw, *The Population of Singapore*, 37.

29 Olivia Goh, “Successful Ageing: A Review of Singapore’s Policy Approaches,” *Ethos* 1 (October 2006): 16-17.

30 See *Report on the Committee on the Problems of the Aged*, Singapore: Ministry of Health, 1984.

were subsequently published in the SBWS's monthly newsletter *Grace Monthly* (*Ci'en* 慈恩).³¹ In one of his sermons, he argued that "Buddhism is a religion that places utmost importance on filial piety 佛教是最重視孝道的宗教."³² He also highlighted that many needy elderly were living below the poverty line.³³ Concretely, Yen Pei led the SBWS' active efforts in public assistance. Volunteers conducted regular house visits to needy elderly in their flats and brought them food and other daily necessities. In the month of March 1985 alone, SBWS distributed a total of 424 kilogrammes of rice, 469 packages of noodles, and public assistance totalling \$1,038.³⁴

In January 1985, Yen Pei founded the Grace Lodge Home for the Aged (*Ci'en lin* 慈恩林) to provide shelter for homeless female elderly, regardless of their race and religion. The Home offered free residence, food, medical care, and physiotherapy for the residents. Both SBWS and the Grace Lodge were officially opened a year later on 16 March 1986.³⁵ At the opening ceremony, Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong commended Yen Pei "for the practical manner in which he has translated the high ideals of Buddhism to meet the needs of the people." He also lauded the SBWS' "management committee, members, volunteers, followers, and supporters" for "contributing to the well-being of [Singapore] society." Ong also recognised the contributions of religious groups

31 See, for instance, *Grace Monthly*, July 1983; *Grace Monthly*, May 1984; *Grace Monthly*, June 1984; *Grace Monthly*, May 1985; *Grace Monthly*, December 1985.

32 *Grace Monthly*, May 1985.

33 Singapore has never had an official poverty line. See Teo You Yenn's chapter for a discussion on poverty in Singapore; *Grace Monthly*, April 1985.

34 *Grace Monthly*, April 1985.

35 The opening ceremony marked the opening of the new SBWS and Grace Lodge premises on 105 Punggol Road.

in “supplementing the efforts of the government in meeting the needs of the aged and the aged sick.”³⁶

Besides the aged, Yen Pei was also an active champion of organ donation. He believed that such donation was in line with Buddhist teachings of compassion and loving-kindness. Yen Pei encouraged the idea that “Buddhism encourages all Buddhists to donate kidney or other useful internal organs to the sick. Buddhists should participate actively in the launching of kidney donation.”³⁷ To encourage the Buddhist community, Yen Pei organized the *Kidney Donation: Buddhist View & Medical View* seminar on 4 September 1983. While he presented the Buddhist perspective, three doctors, Dr. Gwee Ah Leng, Dr. Ong Siew Chey, and Dr. Kwan Kah Yee, discussed organ donation, transplant and kidney dialysis from medical perspectives. The climax of the seminar was a talk by a kidney transplant patient and a patient undergoing kidney dialysis treatment. At the end of the seminar, 305 people pledged their support for organ donation.³⁸

Following the success of the seminar, Yen Pei organised a five-day Kidney Care Exhibition at the World Trade Centre in December 1983. He believed that “prevention is better than cure” (預防勝於治療). The exhibition aimed to generate greater social awareness of a healthy lifestyle and diet to prevent kidney problems. Yen Pei also convened English-language and Chinese-language panels to discuss kidney disease, prevention, and healthy living.³⁹

A decade later, Yen Pei founded the Singapore Buddhist Welfare Services-National Kidney Foundation Dialysis Centre in a residential estate at Block 114 Hougang Avenue 1. SBWS became the first sponsor to bear the full cost of S\$1.5 million to build the

³⁶ *Grace Monthly*, March 1986.

³⁷ *Grace Monthly*, August 1983.

³⁸ *Grace Monthly*, September 1983.

³⁹ *Grace Monthly*, December 1983.

National Kidney Foundation's (NKF) fifth dialysis centre in the north-eastern part of Singapore. The organization also pledged a long-term commitment to kidney patients and became the first to sponsor an annual S\$700,000 running cost to support the dialysis centre. The centre was officially opened on 13 June 1992 by George Yeo, the Minister for Information and the Arts. It currently has 22 dialysis stations that can accommodate 132 kidney patients either residing or working in Hougang and neighbouring districts. It also provides subsidies and financial assistance to needy patients.⁴⁰

A third concern for Yen Pei was drug abuse. In the 1970s, the problem of young drug addicts became an issue of national concern. Young secondary school students began to experiment with drugs like MX pills, and later, heroin. As the number of addicts increased, the government argued for "a need for harsher measures to tackle what it considered to be a situation that 'had reached epidemic, alarming proportions'."⁴¹ In 1971, the government established the Central Narcotics Bureau—the primary drug enforcement agency in Singapore—to counter the menace. A year later, the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association was founded as a Voluntary Welfare Organization to promote drug abuse prevention in Singapore. At the time, there was only one government-run drug rehabilitation centre on St. John's Island and no halfway houses or aftercare services.⁴² Yen Pei recognised the need for Buddhists to

40 *Grace Monthly*, December 1991; "SBWS-NKF Dialysis Centre," http://www.sbws.org.sg/4f_nkf.html (accessed August 20, 2018).

41 Noorman Abdullah, "Exploring Constructions of the 'Drug Problem' in Historical and Contemporary Singapore," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 7, 2 (December 2005): 50.

42 "History of Drug Abuse & SANA," <http://www.sana.org.sg/about-us/history/> (accessed August 20, 2018); For a history of anti-drug movement in Singapore, see Tan Ooi Boon, *Slaying The Dragon: Singapore's Fight Against Drugs*, Singapore: SNP International Publishing Pte Ltd, 2006.

be aware of drug abuse and to support the government's efforts in combating the problem. In his sermons, he warned that drug abuse is "harmful to one's health," "ruins a person's future," and "upsets the peace and prosperity of the society." He also stressed that the Buddhist precept opposes intoxication.

Nonetheless, Yen Pei pointed out that Buddhists should be sympathetic to former drug addicts and help them to overcome their "psychological and material instabilities."⁴³ To support former drug addicts in their recovery, he established Green Haven, the first and only Buddhist halfway house in Singapore in 1993. SBWS fully funds and operates the institution. Green Haven provides a 6-to-12 month long residential rehabilitation and treatment program for former drug addicts. It offers a wide range of services, including individual, family and group counselling, enrichment courses, community services, aftercare services, and religious, cultural and recreational activities. More importantly, Green Haven assists former drug addicts in seeking both accommodation and employment in the final phase of their rehabilitation program; this would help them return to their family and reintegrate into society.⁴⁴

Yen Pei passed away unexpectedly on November 11, 1996. After his demise, Yen Pei's disciple, Kuan Yan, succeeded him as president of SBWS. The organization continues to offer a wide range of services that includes medical and nursing care, public education, childcare, and other social welfare and community services.⁴⁵

43 *Grace Monthly*, April 1983.

44 "Green Haven," http://www.sbws.org.sg/4l_gh.html (accessed August 20, 2018).

45 "Our Services and Affiliates," http://www.sbws.org.sg/4o_sbws.html (accessed August 20, 2018).

Spreading Humanistic Buddhism in Contemporary Singapore

In her seminal work *State, Society and Religious Engineering: Towards a Reformist Buddhism in Singapore* (2003), Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng examines the process of ‘Buddhicization’ of Chinese religious syncretism and a movement towards Reformist Buddhism within the Chinese community whereby 65% of the Buddhists began to consider themselves as Reformist Buddhists. She argues that the agents responsible for transforming the religious landscape of the Singapore Chinese include the Singapore state, the Buddhist Sangha, and the Reformist Buddhist within the religious community.⁴⁶ Kuah-Pearce suggests that Reformist Buddhists engage in six main types of religious activities, namely, propagating Buddhist scriptural knowledge to the public, encouraging general participation, cultivating committed Reformist Buddhists, performing missionary work and engaging in subtle proselytization, putting faith into real life practice and action, and legitimizing Vesak as a public holiday.⁴⁷ I argue that the propagation of Humanistic Buddhism is one of the contributing factors for the Reformist Buddhist movement in Singapore. From the 1980s, a number of Taiwanese Buddhist monastics and organizations have made their way to Singapore and contributed to the spread of Humanistic Buddhism in the country. In this section, I will discuss three of the most important Humanistic Buddhist organizations in Singapore, namely, Mahaprajna Buddhist Society (*Huiyan foxue hui* 慧嚴佛學會), Fo Guang Shan Singapore (*Xinjiapo Fo Guang Shan* 新加坡佛光山), and Tzu Chi Singapore (*Xinjiapo Ciji* 新加坡慈濟).

In 1985, Venerable Hou Zhong (Houzhong 厚宗), a Taiwanese monk and disciple of Master Yinshun, migrated to Singapore and

46 Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng, *State, Society and Religious Engineering: Towards a Reformist Buddhism in Singapore* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003) 1.

47 Ibid., 233.

founded the Mahaprajna Buddhist Society. Venerable Hou Zhong was ordained under the tutelage of Master Yinshun at the Fuyan Vihara (*Fuyan jingshe* 福嚴精舍) in 1966. Between 1967 and 1977, he received his Dharma training at the Huiji Auditorium (*Huiji jiangtang* 慧日講堂) in Taipei.⁴⁸ Venerable Hou Zhong came to Singapore and established the Mahaprajna Buddhist Society to propagate the Dharma and promote Buddhist education. His organization has a twofold mission: first, “to nurture true Buddhists through Buddhist education” and “undertake the task of propagating Buddhism for the benefit of sentient beings;” and second, “to provide for the welfare of the Sangha in their daily deeds and medical care.”⁴⁹

The Mahaprajna Buddhist Society propagates Humanistic Buddhism based on Master Yinshun’s *The Way to Buddhahood* (*Chengfo zhi dao* 成佛之道). Hou Zhong organized his master’s teachings of Humanistic Buddhism into a three-year Dharma course curriculum. He and his disciples have taught and continue to teach a weekly 2-hour class for 3 levels of students: beginner, intermediate and advance.⁵⁰ The Mahaprajna Buddhist Society is an example how migrant monks such as Hou Zhong played a role in the propagation of Humanistic Buddhism in Singapore.

Another prominent Humanistic Buddhist organization in Singapore, which needs no introduction, is Fo Guang Shan Singapore. In 1993, the Singapore Chapter of the Buddha’s Light International Association (*Guoji Foguang hui* 國際佛光會) was established to propagate Buddhism in Singapore. Venerable Tzu Chuang (Cizhuang

48 “Religious Advisor,” <https://tmbs.org.sg/religious-advisor-%E5%AE%97%E6%95%99%E9%A1%BE%E9%97%AE/> (accessed August 20, 2018).

49 “About Us,” <https://tmbs.org.sg/%E5%AD%A6%E4%BC%9A%E7%AE%80%E4%BB%8B/> (accessed August 20, 2018).

50 “Religious Advisor,” <https://tmbs.org.sg/religious-advisor-%E5%AE%97%E6%95%99%E9%A1%BE%E9%97%AE/> (accessed August 20, 2018).

慈莊), a disciple of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, came to Singapore to search for a venue to house the Singapore Chapter. A few years later, in 1996, Fo Guang Yuan Singapore (*Xinjiapo Fo Guang Yuan* 新加坡佛光緣) was established at East Coast Road to promote Venerable Master Hsing Yun's vision of Humanistic Buddhism in Singapore. Two years later, in 1998, Fo Guang Yuan and its Water Drop Teahouse (*Dishui fang* 滴水坊) relocated to a bigger premise in Paya Lebar. Since the establishment of Fo Guang Yuan, Hsing Yun regularly visited Singapore to propagate the Dharma and to promote his ideas of Humanistic Buddhism.⁵¹

In 2000, Fo Guang Shan Singapore was officially registered. Four years later, the organization acquired a piece of land in Punggol. After several years of planning and construction, Fo Guang Shan Singapore was completed in October 2007. The modern temple building comprises of the main shrine hall, several multi-purpose classrooms, a visitor center, a dining hall, a hall for sutra manuscripts, a columbarium, a teahouse, an open-air terrace, and a number of modern facilities. It seeks to incorporate modern technology and contemporary arts to propagate the Dharma in global-city Singapore. According to its website, Fo Guang Shan Singapore aims to propagate Humanistic Buddhism and develop a Buddha's Light Pure Land in contemporary Singapore by focusing on four activities, namely, "propagate the Dharma through culture; foster talents through education; benefit society through charity; and purify minds through Dharma services."⁵²

Last but not least, Tzu Chi Singapore is another prominent Humanistic Buddhist organization that has taken root in contemporary Singapore. The organization was officially registered in September 1993. In the beginning, Tzu Chi Singapore did not have their own venue. Therefore, Venerable Huiqi (慧琪), the

51 "About Us," <https://www.fgs.sg/origins-cu3n> (accessed August 20, 2018).

52 Ibid.

abbess of Singapore's Pao Kwan Foh Tang (*Baoguang fotang* 寶光佛堂) allowed Tzu Chi members to conduct their activities in her temple. As Venerable Huiqi and Tzu Chi's founder Venerable Cheng Yen (證嚴, 1937-) were disciples of Master Yinshun, Huiqi was supportive of Tzu Chi's work in Singapore. A few years later, in 1997, the Tzu Chi Cultural Center (Singapore) was established. The Center assisted in translating publications from the Tzu Chi headquarters in Taiwan into English and simplified Chinese, and circulated them in Singapore and other parts of Southeast Asia. Subsequently, in August 1998, the organization was renamed "Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (Singapore Branch)" and relocated to a historical building in Chinatown. The organization promoted the ideals of Humanistic Buddhism through the provision of social welfare services. It played an active role in providing care to needy elderly residents living in the Chinatown area as well as offering assistance on AIDS medications and kidney dialysis to needy patients.⁵³

During the SARS epidemic in 2003, Tzu Chi Singapore collaborated with the Singapore Red Cross for the first time in organizing a blood donation drive to help resolve the problem of blood shortage in Singapore. A year later, the organization established its first Free Clinic in Chinatown to provide free medical services for the elderly. In 2005, Tzu Chi Singapore's Jing Si Hall (*Jingsi tang* 靜思堂) was completed and served as a meeting house for Tzu Chi volunteers to learn the Dharma and engage in social welfare activities. Since then, the organization has established an island-wide network of volunteers to share the Dharma, conduct philanthropic activities, and promote recycling in Singapore.⁵⁴

53 "History," <https://www.tzuchi.org.sg/en/about-us/tzu-chi-singapore/history/> (accessed August 20, 2018).

54 Ibid.

Conclusion

In my talk I have presented a brief history of Humanistic Buddhism in Singapore. I have suggested that the development of Humanistic Buddhism in Singapore can be divided into three phases. The first phase was characterized by the early effort of Master Taixu. Taixu sought to promote his ideas of Human Life Buddhism by inspiring the establishment of Chinese Buddhism Association. He also tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to establish a Nanyang Buddhist Association to promote his ecumenical vision of modernist Buddhism. The second phase was marked by the arrival of Venerable Yen Pei, a prominent student of Taixu and Yinshun. Yen Pei was an advocate of Humanistic Buddhism in Singapore. He first served as the abbot of Leng Foong Prajna Auditorium, and later, established the SBWS. Yen Pei relied upon Buddhist doctrines to not only justify the need for Singaporean Buddhists to be socially relevant and contribute to social welfare, but also went so far as to suggest that Buddhist teachings could be used as practical solutions to addressing national issues. The third phase saw the arrival of Taiwanese monastics and organizations in Singapore. Humanistic Buddhist organizations such as the Mahaprajna Buddhist Society, Fo Guang Shan Singapore, and Tzu Chi Singapore were important institutions in the spread of Buddhist teachings and promotion of social welfare services in contemporary Singapore. Future research can focus on the impact and long-term development of Humanistic Buddhism in the global city-state.



Know your place, speak sincerely, act
rationally, and make friends with honest
people.

—Source: *The Everlasting Light:
Dharma Thoughts of Master Hsing Yun*